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# Gods, heroes, and figureheads

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Gods, Heroes, and Figureheads

by

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May 20, 1994

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## Illustrations

Figure	Page
1. Pandora's Box, 48" x 36"	5
2. Minerva, 36" x 24"	6
3. Proserpine, 35" x 25"	7
4. Pomona, 35" x 25"	8
5. TV. Buddha, 10" x 8"	10
6. Thoughts of a Life Before, 48" x 36"	11
7. Super Girl, 56" x 48"	12
8. Fertility, 40" x 30"	13
9. You Are What You Eat, 56" x 48"	14

## Introduction

As I was growing up I was always encouraged to take part in activities that would stimulate my mind. This entailed activities that at the time were boring to me; reading, drawing, learning about things such as art, science, and religion. These were not the things that are considered great fun to a young child, but now, I am grateful that I have had this guidance.

Different types of art, such as aboriginal cave art, comic books, and Pop art, are visual forms that have influenced my work throughout my growing older. Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Haring, and Max Ernst have always been figures that interest me, and that interest has had an effect on my work.

When I was young, my father would sit my sister and me in front of the television and make us watch educational science programs. These programs were not my favorite, but I did develop an interest in archaeology from them. Whether it is dinosaurs, cave paintings, or the statue of the Venus of Willendorf, I love it. This Summer I went to Australia for a vacation, and one of the reasons we chose to go there was specifically for the Aboriginal art and cave paintings. Now, when you look at my paintings, my influence from Aboriginal art becomes evident. The Aboriginal people are very spiritual and have many sacred places and stories that guard them though their life. This is one of the reasons that I found them so interesting. I believe that their seclusion is much like other religions. If you do not belong to the group you can not learn much, and what you do learn seems very superstitious.

As a child I would wake up early on Saturday morning just to get downstairs to watch the Super Heroes on early morning cartoons. When I grew older this excitement did not change, but evolved into a love for comic books, Greek and Roman Mythology, and any action or science fiction story I could get my hands on.

One of the aspects I enjoy about Roy Lichtenstein is that he has standardized the imagery of traditional comic strips that are devoted to violent action and sentimental love. He has taken something that is considered common to the average American and made it into art. Looking at Lichtenstein's art also made me look at the comic books I have been reading for years in a different light. Now they are no longer just comics that I could as easily find in the Sunday paper but each frame is bright in color and exciting in the drawings. I was immediately attracted to the strong lines and bright colors that appear in Lichtenstein's work and in comic books and noticed that similar lines and color work now appear in my own work.

I can not remember the first time I saw work by Keith Haring, but I do remember that I was immediately captivated by it. Since first seeing his work, I have been able to go to New York City to see some of his work and I have to say that my favorite pieces of his are the ones that I have seen on peoples T-shirts, or painted in basketball courts. Basically, I enjoy the pieces of Haring's that are public works, works where it is not necessary to pay for them in order to see them. "Haring took up the traditional role of performing philosopher-humanizing, popularizing, personalizing, illustrating the great pagan insights of our race...Keith Haring's art spanned the history of the human spirit."<sup>1</sup> Haring's work is basic in its idea, and easy for people to understand. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Haring: Future Primeval , p. 11.

something that I believe is important when art is trying to say something in particular, like Haring's fight against AIDS.

When I was an undergraduate I had an assignment that revolved around the work of Max Ernst. As I researched his art work, I became attracted by the fact that everything does not have to be perfect. After undergraduate work as a craft person, I was very restrained in my art work, but did not realize this. I left that part of school with the idea that craftsmanship was more important than content. When I began painting I was still very tight in my work. My lines and shapes that I created were exact and ridged, but after a while I began to see that not everything has to be measured and straight. In fact its more interesting if things are not exact. I began to concentrate on what I was painting about, rather than what the technique was that I used.

Max Ernst was a Dadaist. I have always enjoyed this style of art. These were the artists and performers who went against the grain and created what they wanted, despite what society said. I was attracted to this artist, and this art because they have the type of attitude that I wanted to have. They were the artists that created art from simple found objects, and random and unplanned actions. A body print is a random act. I am never quite sure what will occur when I create a body print. This occurrence is very similar to a Dadaist reaction to art. My body print paintings are creations of art from a chance happening .

Max Ernst was an artist who had a sense of humor about his art work and about himself. He took serious thoughts and made them into paintings that had a whimsical, self-mocking tone to them. Later, in his twilight years, color became a more important aspect of his art. Often times creatures would



appear- a friend, a wife, or a stranger - birdlike, who casts a shadow across the canvas. Max Ernst's works of art create and tell stories on their own.

When I was about eighteen I was hospitalized for a problem that concerned my heart. For several months things were extremely unsure, and I spent weeks at a time in the hospital. This placed a lot of stress on my family, and many questions in their minds on whether things would ever be back to normal. There was even some question as to if I would survive. At this point in my life I began to think about what comes after our life here on earth. If there is anything, what is it? What is it that guides us in the life we live now? Since then, my heart problem has been resolved as much as it can be right now. I have been through college, fallen in love and married a man who is Jewish, even though I am not, and found out that one of the closest people to me has AIDS. These things have made me realize that faith is something inside a person, not on TV.

My thesis is about Gods, Heroes, and Figureheads. The forces that guide man through his life. What is it that we believe in, and once believed in, that makes us go on living? What rules us, and in the end, who do we answer to?

## CHAPTER 1

### Mythological Gods

My first painting is a body print that was created on a prestretched canvas. The canvas was painted light blue and then spray painted with gold stripes. After the background had been established the body print was then painted on top of this paint. The print was made from tempera paint that was a mixture of white, navy, and black, with accents of magenta. After the print was created, acrylic paint and chalk pastel were then applied to the canvas, on the print and around it in the background area.

The title of this painting is *Pandora's Box*. Pandora's Box is the story of the earth's creation from Greek mythology, and why mankind is cursed with so many bad things in today's world. In the story Pandora is made by all the gods as a mate for man, who is already on earth. Because man has misbehaved, by stealing fire from the gods, Pandora is made to be curious by nature. She is sent to Earth as man's downfall, with a box that holds all the chaos of the world. "One day she slipped off the cover and looked in. Forthwith there escaped a multitude of plagues for hapless man - such as gout, rheumatism, and colic for his body, and envy, spite, and revenge for his mind - and scattered themselves far and wide. Pandora hastened to replace the lid; but alas! The whole contents of the box had escaped, one thing only excepted, which lay at the bottom, and that was hope."<sup>2</sup> Pandora dooms the earth much like Eve did in the creation story of the bible.

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<sup>2</sup> The Age of Fable, p. 26.







My second painting runs along the same line of thought as the first. It is a body print, the idea of the painting comes from Greek Mythology. The body print is done with white tempera paint on paper. The print and the paper are then tinted with water color and gouache paint, this gives both a light streaked look. The painting is then over painted with oil bar paint to give a line drawn look.

The Title of this painting is *Minerva*. "Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, was the daughter of Jupiter. She was said to have leaped forth from his brain, mature, and in complete armor." <sup>3</sup>

Minerva was said to have been a woman strong in warfare and in the hunt. I was drawn to her as a subject for my painting because I wanted to be able to relate to her. She was a character who was strong and wise, but also of beauty, inner and outer. This is something I would like to be able to be some day.

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<sup>3</sup> The Age of Fable, p. 91.





The next painting is of the same series, body prints that are done on paper. This one is called *Proserpine* , She too is a character that is taken from Greek mythology. She was to become Pluto's wife, taken by him while she was playing with her companions. "She screamed for help to her mother and her companions; and when in her fright she dropped the corners of her apron and let the flowers fall, childlike she felt the loss of them as an addition to her grief." <sup>4</sup> Proserpine became the queen of the dead and Pluto's bride.

The reason that I painted this was because of my interest in different cultures, and different peoples ideas of heaven and hell. Growing up, going to catholic grade school I learned the ideas of the church, what they think good and bad are, and who they think will and will not go to heaven. Since then I have expanded my ideas and beliefs, and now have come to my own conclusion of what makes someone or something good or bad. The quote about Proserpine, while talking of flowers falling from an apron, gives the impression of dying and at the same time, the uncertainty that surrounds dying. This is something that many people who ask the question, what comes after life, must face.

This painting is a body print done with white tempera on parchment paper. The print was gently washed with water color paint while the back ground field is a wash of black gouache. After this the back ground lines and the detail work on the actual print was done with oil bar oil paint.

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<sup>4</sup> The Age of Fable, p. 54.







The last painting of the Greek - Roman Mythology series is called *Pomona*. Pomona was a wood nymph who enjoyed being with plants more than she enjoyed being with people. "She took care that her favorites should not suffer from drought, and led streams of water by them that thirsty roots might drink. This occupation was her pursuit, her passion."<sup>5</sup>

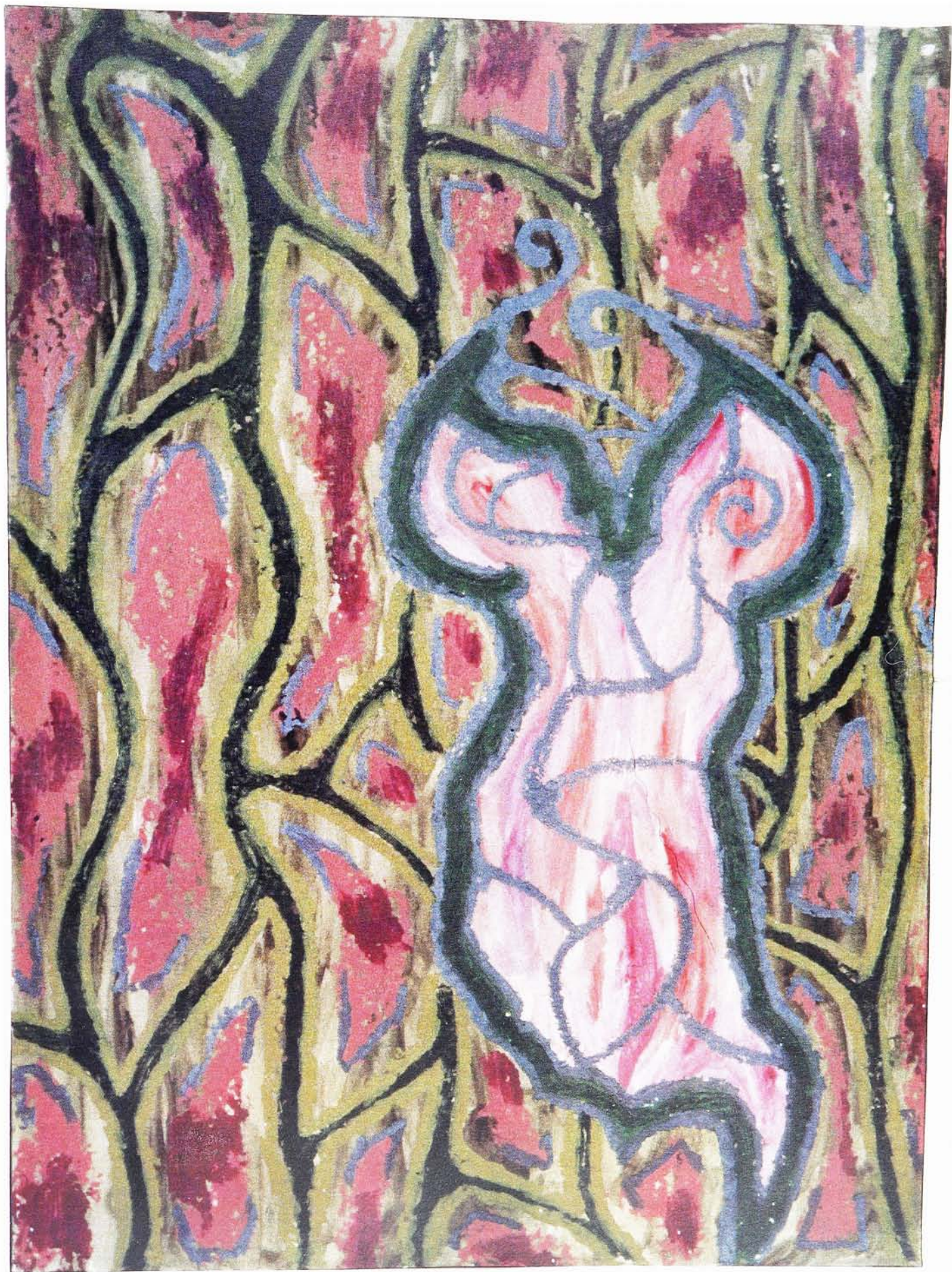
This painting was created for my mother. Because of her skill with orchids and my love for mythology the two ideas seemed to fit quite well together. I have always lacked a green thumb, but because of the results I have seen that my mother can achieve with her plants I thought that Pomona was a character that my mother could relate to, even though my mother enjoys the company of others.

This painting was done on parchment paper with the body print created with white tempera paint. I then painted a light wash of water color over the print to give it color. The back ground was also painted with water color to give a streaked look to it. Again the crayon like style of the painting is done with oil bar paint. I tried to get the composition of the body print and the background of the painting to flow together. I wanted the same colors that appear in and on the print, to appear as the main colors of the background.

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<sup>5</sup> The Age of Fable, p. 70.







The three paintings, *Minerva*, *Proserpine*, and *Pomona*, were created in the idea that they were a series. I had them professionally framed under glass to preserve the quality of the water color paint and the paper that they are on. With the painting *Pomona* I ran into a problem because it did not have the matching color black in it like the other two paintings. This is why there is a variation in the frame and mat color for this painting. Another problem that might change the way a person looks at this series is the fact that one of the frames is of smaller size than the other two. This was not an intentional thing, but at the same time it did not look bad at the show and did not detract from them as a group.

## CHAPTER 2

### Gods of Propaganda and Hype

The painting, *TV. Buddha*, is a small 8" x 10" stretched canvas that is Painted with acrylic paint. It is a crude, small painting but it explains quite a bit for being so small and simple.

The idea I wanted to express with this painting is to show how Americans are chained to there television sets, and almost worship them. It is an item that is found in almost every house in America. The television is a major source of news and entertainment to the house hold and can direct the way a persons thoughts travel.

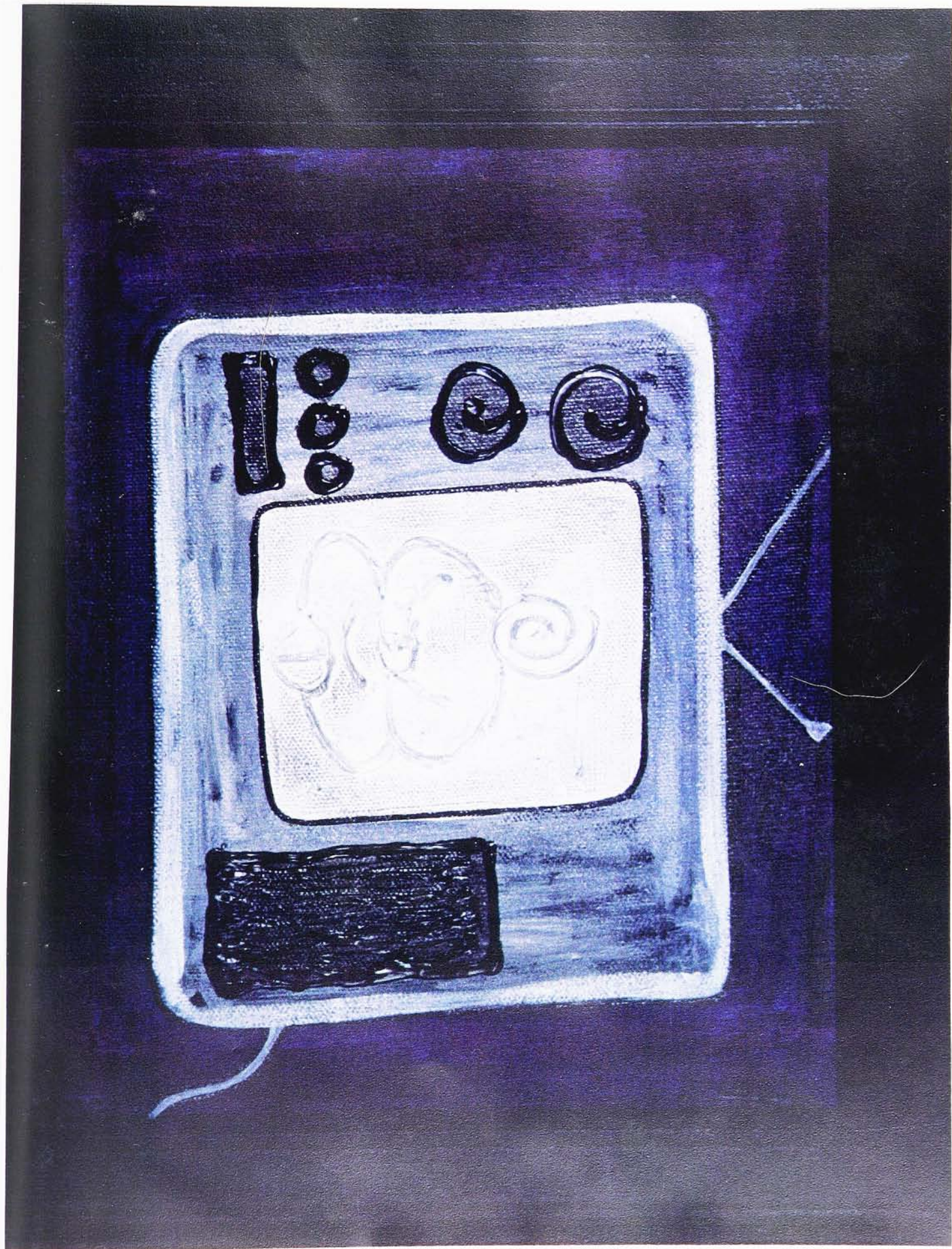
I painted this after I heard someone say that it takes less brain activity to watch TV. than it does to do nothing at all. This is a fact that I find amazing and yet not at all hard to believe.

The figure in the painting is Buddha, not because I believe in the Buddhist way, but because Buddha has always seemed to be an immobile symbol of joviality and luck. As in the example of rubbing the Buddha's head or stomach for good luck. A philosophy that I do follow is that of the Taoist and Lao Tzu: "While modern life emphasizes the surface of things, the Tao teaches that without the center, the surface means nothing. It is not what we look like, what we do, but what we are that brings meaning and purpose. We can find this deep center in reflection or meditation. Detaching from particulars, we see the evolving patterns." <sup>6</sup> This quote tells us to look into ourselves for answers, and not into a TV set.

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<sup>6</sup> The Tao of Inner Peace, p. 62.







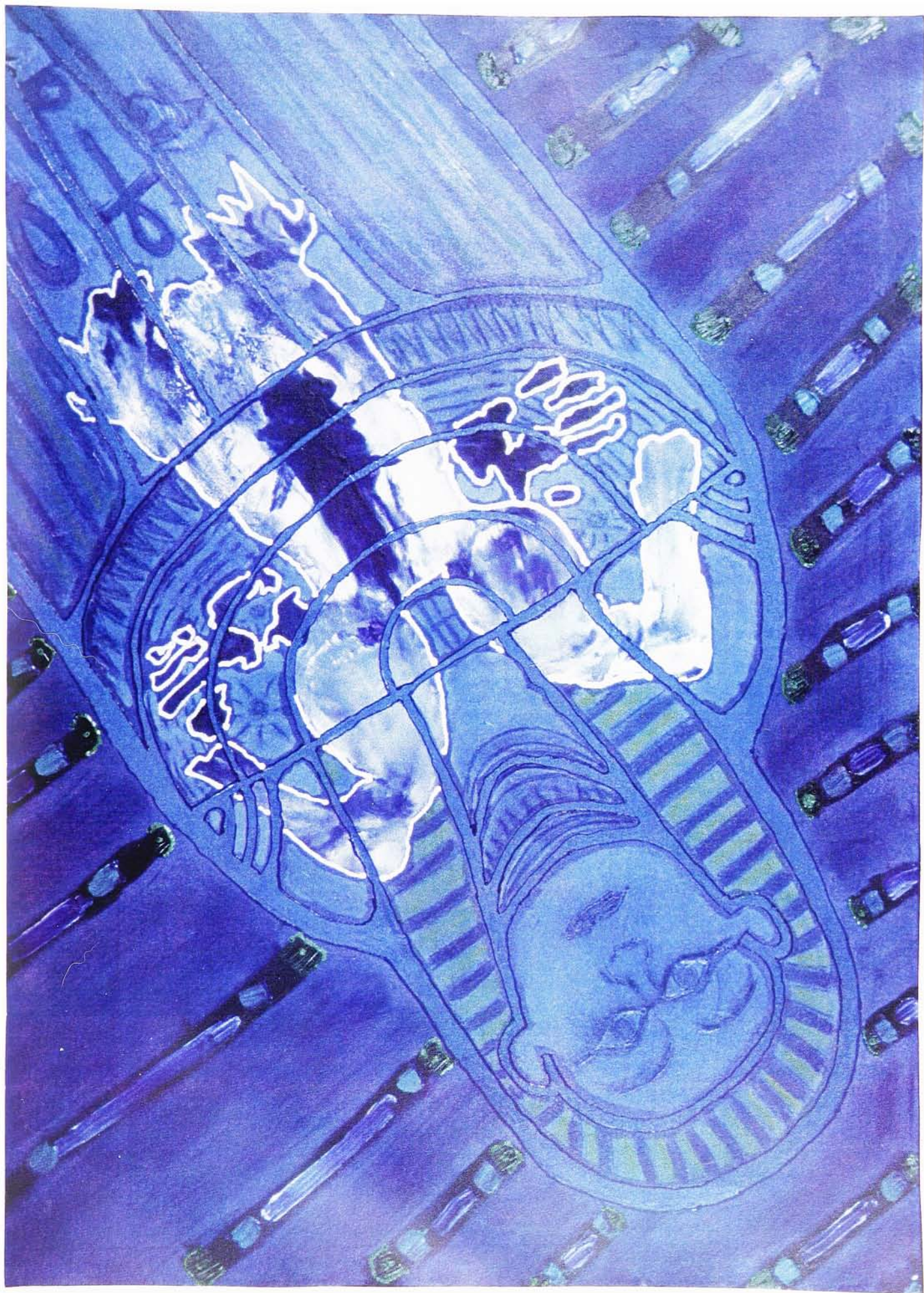
The painting, *Thoughts of a Life Before*, is of an Egyptian mummy. It is the second painting of the mummy series. The body print is inside the shape of the Sarcophagus, stripes arc over the print to give the effect that there is a body in the case, and that the case is closed.

This was my least favorite of the paintings that I had in my thesis show, but it was the one I got the most compliments on at the time of the opening. I was much happier with how this painting looked when it was hung in the gallery and had the lights positioned on it. I like the idea that Egyptian people once believed that their kings were able to have some form of life after death. The idea of immortality has always been something that has seemed mystical and romantic to me.

The detail of the mummy is created in blue acrylic paint with chalk pastel drawn over it and then sprayed with a clear acrylic spray. This technique was used in the face and headdress of the mummy. The body print is made from White and navy blue tempera paint. The print was applied after the initial background color was laid out, but before the sarcophagus was painted.

The mummy is depicted coming in at an angle from the top left of the canvas in a downward slant, looking much like a rocket. There are stripes that are painted perpendicular to the line of the mummy. These are to lend balance and order to the painting.





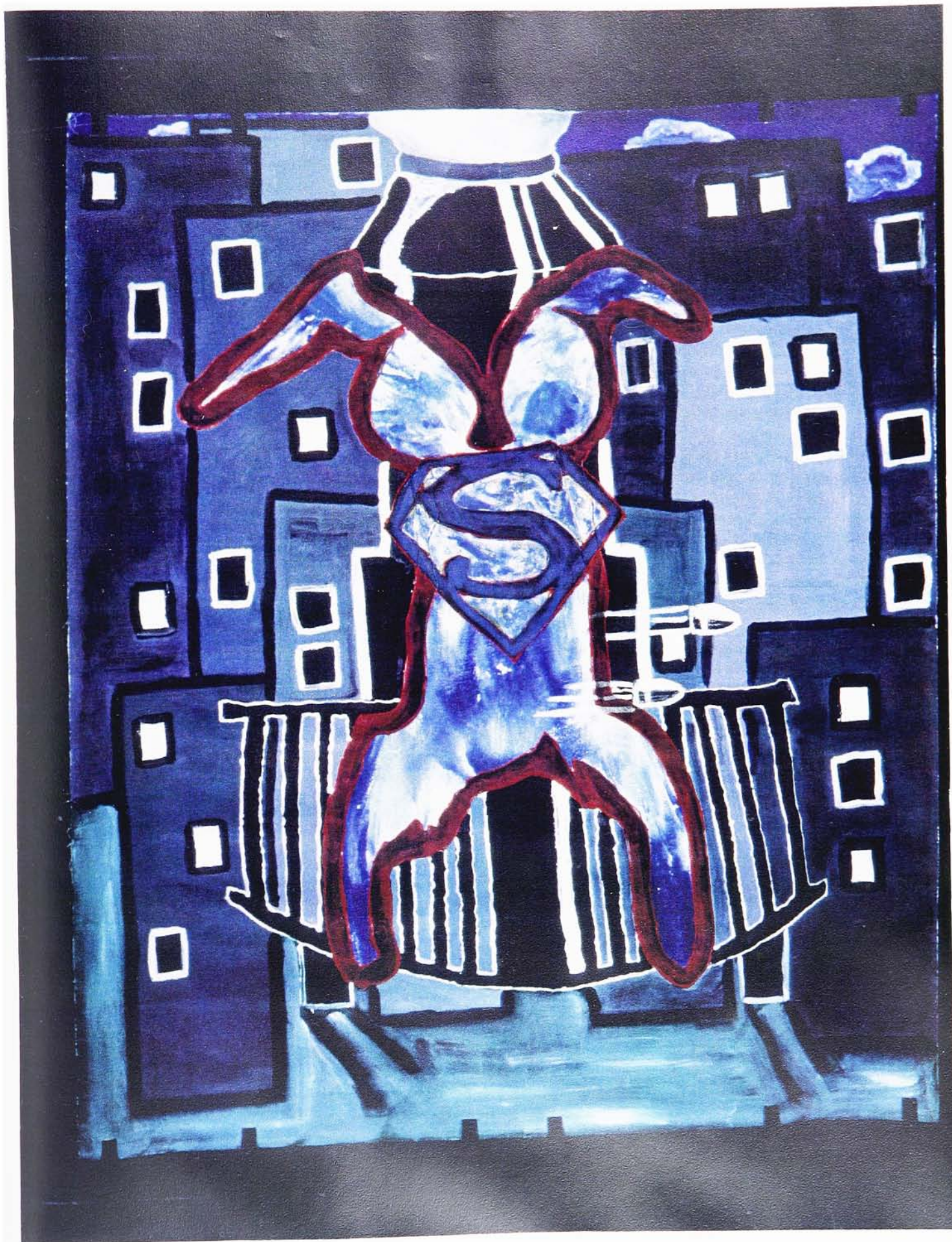


The painting, *Super Girl*, came about because of my love of comic books and their stories. Recently comic books have changed the way they look. The printing has gotten better and the colors have gotten brighter. They have become more like a Lichtenstein painting than a Sunday comic strip.

Aquaman and Superman were always two of my favorite heroes, so it would only make sense that I would want to emulate them. When I created this painting I was thinking of the Superman slogan that goes with the comic strip, and that is, "Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound..." Superman has been a hero of an American children for over fifty years. He has been a figure head that guides peoples morals and is a symbol of goodness and power. This is something that many people want to be like, qualities that have made the figure of Superman, a comic book character, a hero. This is what attracted me to the character, and is what made me want to be like him when I was a young child.

The painting is on an unstretched canvas. The body print is composed of white, navy, and cerulean blue tempera paint. I used large spaces of flat color and thick black lines to give the impression of a picture from a comic book. The mounting of the painting was meant to be strong and powerful in line and form.







### CHAPTER 3

#### Corner Stones of Life and Worship

The painting, *Fertility*, was created after finding out that a friend of our family was going to have a baby. Now often the idea of a baby is considered a wonderful thing, and I believe that they are, but with this baby came a few problems. The circumstances that surround this new arrival lead to questions like, why is the mother having this baby, and for who? I believe that children are a wonderful occurrence and that they should be celebrated no matter what. They should not be punished for there parents mistakes. "Too often, people place their happiness outside themselves, which leads to endless straining competition, and distress. Restless and dissatisfied they are always searching for more." <sup>7</sup> This painting was my therapy for dealing with a situation in which no one knows how to act, or what to say. In many cultures people pray to fertility gods in order to have a strong, healthy, and large family. I guess that this was my way of wishing that upon my friend.

This painting is a combination of tempera, gouache, and acrylic paint. The body print is an application of white and cerulean blue tempera paint. There is a small heart that is in the center of the body print, this symbolizes the small beginnings of the baby. The pattern work of small dots that give texture and pattern to the canvas are similar to the aboriginal dot paintings. To me, this pattern work was the idea of a combination of the body and soul merging to become one in the form of the baby.

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<sup>7</sup> The Tao of Inner Peace, p. 41







*You are What You Eat*, is a painting that I was inspired to paint when I was feeling fuller than usual in the middle of winter. At this point in the winter it was too cold to go outside and exercise, and things were too busy for me to worry about eating a correct diet. Consequently I felt fat.

I was taking a metals elective at the time, so the idea of pictures inside the painting came about. Since there were days when I felt good about myself, and days when I felt bad, I wanted to show this in my painting. This is why the painting has the ability to open and close, so that the body of the painting may become fat or thin, depending upon the viewers mood. There is lace and elastic that connects the two halves of the painting together, giving the impression of a woman's undergarments.

The canvas the painting is on was primed with a stiff gesso in order to keep the painting stable. The body print was done on the canvas after it had been cut in half. The tempera paint used in the print was a combination of white, navy, magenta, and black. The outlining of the figure and the painted frame were done next, to give an idea of where the metal plates could be sewn on. After the plates were in place the final line work, the fringe and lace, and the hanging system were devised.







## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusion

I completed my undergraduate work here at R. I. T. in the Glass program, and studied under professor Michael Taylor. During my four years as an undergraduate my interest in glass changed from working with "hot" glass, such as blowing and fusing, to working with "cold" glass in mosaics. Working in mosaics interested me because they dealt with pattern, color, and texture. My interest in mosaics is still present, but in my graduate work this experience changed into knowledge that helped me work with color and shape in paint.

The body prints in all the paintings were of me. They are exactly what they sound like. An adult version of finger painting. I created the prints in the basement of my house by laying out the canvas, spreading the color of paint that I wanted on my body, and then laying myself on top of the canvas. This created a body print. It does not bother me that all the body prints in the paintings are female, and are in fact me. Lately, I have noticed that God is almost always depicted in the male gender. I do not believe that this is how it should be. My work shows the Supreme Being as a female. Sometimes she is fragile and weak, and other times she is a figure of strength and power. This is how I see things, things that are on a more equal basis of being male or female.

My thesis was titled, Gods, Heroes, And Figure heads. I set out to find out what guided people and what they believed in. What I found out was, what guided me, what my beliefs are, and who is a hero in my eyes. My paintings do not specifically tell you who my heroes are and what it is that I

worship. Rather they show a little bit about what is going on inside my head. They tell of the strength that I want to acquire, of the ideas that I am unsure of, and of the uncertainties that I have tried to overcome.

"Peace comes from transcending polarities with a vision of the larger whole. Call that vision Life, God, Existence, or Tao. It many names. . . Beyond the surface differences, it is the One that includes us all. . . Cultivating that inner space we become more balanced, more harmonious, more useful."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Tao of Inner Peace, pp. 40-41.

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